

Failure to Produce Viet Miracles Puts Gen. Lansdale on Defensive

By Stanley Karnow

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SAIGON, Feb. 24—When he arrived in Saigon last summer as American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's "Special Assistant," Maj. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale was widely publicized as the man who could guide South Vietnam's leaders towards the kind of social revolution necessary to defeat Communism.

Lansdale was, after all, a living legend. He had helped President Ramon Magsaysay to defeat the Communist-led Huk rebels in the Philippines. Operating behind the scenes, he aided President Ngo Dinh Diem to consolidate his power in Saigon after 1954. To his own distress, Lansdale was expected to repeat those miracles when he returned here.

Now, nearly six months later, it is widely acknowledged here that Lansdale has performed no miracles. Instead, the key question is whether he has been able to do anything even remotely significant.

His adversaries, who are numerous within the U.S. Mission, contend that Lansdale and his eleven-man team have failed to make the slightest impact on the Vietnam situation. They support this view by pointing out that, in a major reorganization last week, Lansdale was bypassed and authority for over-all non-military programs was vested in Deputy Ambassador William G. Porter, a career diplomat.

Several of Lansdale's own subordinates agree that their group has accomplished little. However, they blame their lack of achievement on opposition within the vast U.S. bureaucracy here. As they explain it, Lansdale's efforts have been chronically sabotaged by American agency heads jealous of their prerogatives.

More cautious American officials, fearful of controversy, strive to shroud Lansdale in the ambiguous jargon that characterizes much establishment syntax here. To cite one senior U.S. diplomat: "Ed is showing fine capabilities in coordinating concepts."



Associated Press

EDWARD G. LANSDALE

... no miracles

Attempts to evaluate Lansdale's operation fairly are hampered by the fact that nobody here can quite define the role it was initially designed to fulfill.

Some of his original backers in Washington, among them Vice President Humphrey and Sen. Thomas Dodd (D-Conn.), saw Lansdale bringing to the highly-militarized Vietnam situation the philosophies that had accounted for his earlier triumphs in the Philippines and Saigon. Like the harmonica-playing Col. Hillendale in "The Ugly American," for whom he is the model, Lansdale was expected to win the confidence of the Vietnamese and help them to create sound, popular leadership.

In theory, at least, Lansdale was suited to the task. On previous occasions he had displayed an almost uncanny ability to drop into a strange setting, mix with the people, understand the problem, recommend a remedy and assist in its implementation. And he was at his best when he played a solo hand, personifying American power for his native proteges.

But the Vietnam which Lansdale entered last year was far different from the scenes of his past glories. There were no visible leaders comparable to the dynamic

Magsaysay or even the stubbornly nationalistic Diem. More important, the U.S. Mission in Saigon had proliferated into a huge bureaucratic machine.

Lacked Authority

Within this bureaucracy, Lansdale soon found himself just another American official. Moreover, without the authority or finances of U.S. agency under his command, he lacked real weight—a fact the clever Vietnamese were quick to surmise.

Thus, Lansdale and his assistants might spend heady evenings with Vietnamese listening to folk songs and discussing their hopes and dreams. When it came to hard business, however, the Vietnamese went elsewhere. Or, as one high Saigon official put it:

"Mr. Lansdale is a wonderful man. But when our ministry needs money we see the AID people."

Without real authority, furthermore, Lansdale's team has been unable to function decisively in the various programs classified under the awkward heading of "pacification." Newspaper reports to the contrary, Lansdale was not instrumental in training rural police units and political action groups, which were organized by AID and the CIA respectively.

Nor has Lansdale served as an intermediary with the Vietnamese leaders on crucial issues such as peace negotiations or general U.S. policy.

Several U.S. Embassy officials also claim that Lansdale and his subordinates never really developed enough independent sources of information to justify their claim to being "the eyes and ears" of the mission.

In short, as one of Lansdale's own men summed it up:

"We haven't really done anything that couldn't have been done by any bureaucrats."

Reports Proliferate

In a curious way, the anti-bureaucratic, Lansdale, team

has itself taken on bureaucratic trappings. Its members probably turn out as many reports and memoranda as any other Government agency, and they devote themselves intensively to all sorts of minutiae.

They have recently been de-liberating, for example, whether the Saigon government could decently refer to the "fatherland," a term frequently employed by the Communists. Not long ago they came forth with the suggestion that the South Vietnamese post office issue a stamp portraying the different nations contributing to the war effort here.

A few Lansdale team members work on heavier subjects. One in particular has produced important studies on economic warfare techniques used by the Communists.

Lansdale himself is often credited with having given a certain currency to the expression of "social revolution" that figures in many statements by South Vietnam's Premier Nguyen Cao Ky.

Essentially, explains a seasoned American official here, the Lansdale group has not been able to meet the requirements of the present Vietnam situation. As he put it: "We are up against a superb Communist organization that must be uprooted by a better organization. This simply cannot be done by a few men of goodwill."

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